# Alaska's cruise!

by Marian Rohrbeck

Alaska has an amazing travel bargain right in its own back harbor—a two-day, two-night ocean cruise, at an affordable price!

Your cruise ship isn't exactly the "Love Boat," with a suave Captain Steubing circulating among romancing passengers, and the waters this trim blue and white vessel traverses aren't bordered by tropical beaches and swaying palms, nor are your fellow passengers the glamorous characters pictured in shipboard films.

In fact, this local cruise is offered by the *MV Tustumena,* of the Alaska Marine Highways fleet. Your cruise itinerary is from Seward via Valdez to Cordova and return, a weekend voyage which presents a star-studded review of Alaska's own natural wonders, while your "shipmates" are a cross-section of America on the move.

As the *Tustumena* glides out into the evening darkness of Resurrection Bay and the lights of Seward fade away astern, passengers leave the rails to seek their beds for the night. Those beds may be bunks in tiny cabins, chairs in the lounge—or, for the young or hardy, the top deck solarium, carpeted from wall to wall with sleeping bags.

In the morning, early risers watch the sunrise silhouette the jagged peaks and turn the waters Alaska gold. First-timers, who comprise a good part of the passenger list, are tense with anticipation of the coming close-up view of Columbia Glacier.

*Captain Richard Hofstad*

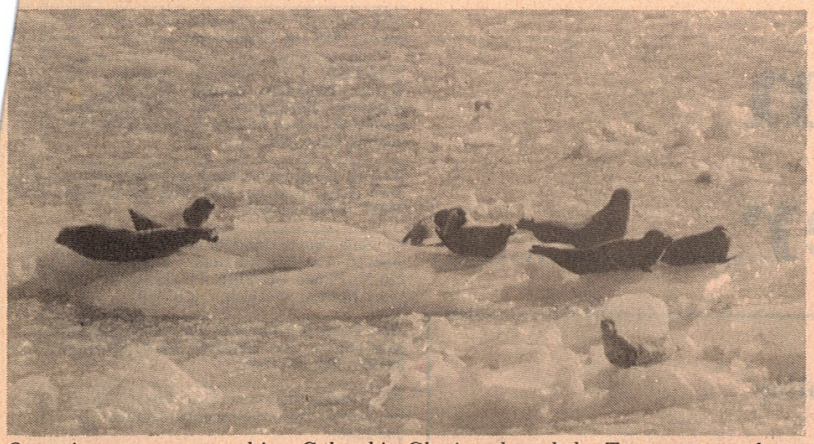
Over the loudspeaker booms a genial voice, "Look up ahead—there are at least 15 sea otters on that rock! And two whales just surfaced on the port side!"

The voice is that of Captain Richard Hofstad, master of the *Tustumena*—unlike his TV counterpart, seldom seen by the passengers, but often heard as he enthusiastically calls attention to wondrous sights along the way.

Captain Hofstad is not a loquacious man, except when talking about his ship and the watery highway it travels. He is a native Alaskan, with a family homestead in Petersburg, and has worked for the Alaskan Marine Highways since its inception in 1963, starting out as a sailor on the *MV Malaspina.*

A stocky silver-haired man, Captain Hofstad's blue eyes seem to reflect a lifetime of scanning the seas, as did those of his seafaring ancestors.

"My great-grandfather in Norway had 11 children, and a ship for each one. He gave his newest vessel, a fine ship 250 feet long, to my grandfather, his youngest son. It was the biggest



*Opposite page, approaching Columbia Glacier aboard the* ***Tustumena;*** *above, some curious seals observe the vessel as it moves through the ice-choked bay.*

fishing vessel on the north coast at that time. All the men from town of Nesna fished on my grandfather's boat."

He interrupts his recollection to grab the microphone and call the passengers' attention to two bald eagles atop tall trees on the shoreline.

The approach to Columbia Bay is heralded by the appearance of icebergs in weird and wonderful shapes, increasing in number as one nears the entrance to the bay. In the distance one gets the first sight of the lower ten miles of Columbia Glacier's 41-mile length.

The bay itself seems a mass of moving ice, at first glance impenetrable. From the vantage point in the wheelhouse, one may watch the ferry weave its way among the floes as the captain constantly directs the crewman at the wheel.

"Through that opening in the ice—that's the best way!" "Ten right!" Midships!" "Steady!" It is Greek to the landlubber—or Norwegian, anyway—but the man at the wheel understands. Attached to the polished wood paneling of the wheelhouse is a bronze plaque reading, "A CRASH AT SEA COULD RUIN YOUR WHOLE DAY!"

The engines are cut, and the vessel coasts silently deeper into the bay. Hundreds of seals are lounging on the surrounding ice, gazing curiously at the strange mechanical monster invading their domain.

The awestruck passengers gather on deck as the vessel pushes closer and closer to the face of the glacier, towering up to 262 feet above the water, an incredibly intense blue. The *Tustumena* comes to a complete stop.

No one speaks above a whisper. The moment has come! There is a sudden sharp blast from the ferry's whistle. Cameras are aimed. Massive chunks of ice break loose from the face of the glacier and fall, sending spray high in the air as they crash into the water—and 200 camera shutters click in unison!

After a brief stop at Valdez the minicruise continues to Cordova, a town accessible only by sea or air. To some passengers disembarking there, the ferry trip is merely part of the routine of getting home. To tourists from afar, it is the stuff of dreams.

"Climb in the truck and I'll take you to town," says a woman on the dock at Cordova. It is a healthy uphill hike from the ferry landing, so ten passengers pile in the pickup, the driver tells them the location of Cordova's restaurants and museum, and later drives along the main street to gather up her passengers at the end of their four-hour visit. Surprising? Not in Cordova.

Back on the ferry for another night, passengers are rocked to sleep, at times rather violently, by high seas on Prince William Sound. In the morning a return visit to Columbia Glacier sends Kodak stock up again.

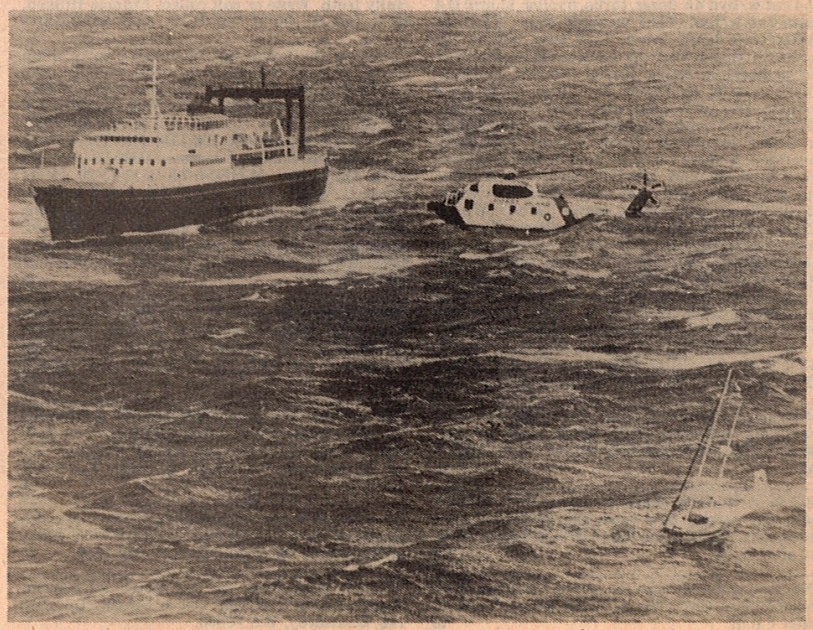
On occasion, ferry travelers may participate in a real adventure as an unexpected bonus to a pleasure cruise. A framed citation from the Alaska Legislature and a letter of commendation from Governor Hammond are mounted on the wall outside the lounge. The letter is addressed to the officers and crew of the *Tustumena* "for heroic performances in answering the call of not one, but two distressed vessels in mountainous seas off the rugged coast of the western Gulf of Alaska on October 14 and 17, 1977.

"Your performance in near-hurricane weather aiding the sailing vessel *Wind Dance* has been credited with the saving of two lives. Your aid in searching for the *F/V Seafarer* off the Barren Islands on October 17 no doubt contributed to the saving of yet another three lost souls."

A framed photograph shows the ferry standing by, after locating the *Wind Dancer,* with a helicopter hovering overhead.

Yes, the sturdy ferry is a far cry from the "Love Boat." Its accomodations are spartan in decor, but the views from its windows are unparalleled—towering peaks, foaming waterfalls crashing down granite cliffs, massive glaciers calving giant bergs into ice-choked fjords. Bears along a wooded shore, almost close enough to touch, a bald eagle in a treetop, spouting whales...

You take the Love Boat; I'll take the *Tustumena.*



*The* ***Tustumena's*** *rescue of the sailboat* ***Wind Dance,*** *lower right.*

# FERRYBOAT SKIPPER

## FROM KETCHIKAN TO JUNEAU WITH CAPTAIN ROBERT SMITH

# STORY BY JAMES WILLWERTH, WITH PHOTOS BY MARK KELLEY

After midnight: the ferryboat *Malaspina,* an 18-year veteran of Alaska's Marine Highway system, moves away from Juneau into the dark water of Gastineau Channel with a deep rumble of twin 4,000-horsepower diesel engines. It is a rare, relatively sweltering summer evening in the high 70s, and snowy razorback mountains ringing Stephens Passage to the south beckon in the moonlit distance.

At the helm, Relief Capt. Robert W. Smith, 50, is "conning" the ferry out. Standing on the bridge, hands on the twin throttles, he is relatively relaxed. This is not Wrangell Narrows in a ghostly fog, or the December run on the ferry *Tustumena* to Kodiak Island in 70-knot winds — both frequent exercises for him. He sets a southernly course at about 180-degrees. When the nearly 3,000-ton ship is west of the channel's Rock Dump buoy, he adjusts to 130-degrees southwest to clear Sheep Creek dolphin, a beacon set atop 40-foot pilings.

He is ready for cruising speed now. Smith pushes the signal indicator on the polished brass "enunciator," an internal ship telegraph system, to 16½ knots to let the engine room know that things are settling down. Then he aims the *Malaspina,* so to speak, at Petersburg, seven and a half hours running time south. Crewmen will take over until his expertise is required again. After Petersburg, he'll dock at Wrangell, Ketchikan and Prince Rupert in British Columbia before turning back to Juneau. Alaska's capital is soon a string of jewels far astern in the darkness.

A square-jawed, blunt-spoken "old man" who has been at sea since he shipped out of Seattle at 14, Smith belongs to no ship in the ferry fleet. Holding premium "master" and "first-class pilot" licenses for all ocean-going tonnage and nearly all of Alaska's coastline, he is the system's only sailing master who can work all the passages of southeast and southwest Alaska. As a result, he constantly hops between boats, filling in for vacationing or otherwise indisposed captains such as the *Malaspina's* Harold Payne, who fell ill just before tonight's run started. At first glance, Smith appears less than salty. Clean-shaven with carefully parted hair, he tends to dress during the summers in a businesslike white shirt, slacks and loafers. A watchband adorned with flattened gold nuggets and a nugget pendant on a gold chain with a diamond at its center liven his appearance a bit, though it is still deceiving. Smith is about as seaworthy as sailors come. Reared in South Carolina, transplanted to Seattle, he persuaded a friend to sign papers in 1944 saying he was 16 in order to get into World War II. He was a 14-year-old apprentice ironworker at the time.

"There was a war on, and I wanted to see it," Smith explains quietly. "I've been around boats ever since. The sea life is all I've ever done."

He spent a dozen years with the Merchant Marine and its wartime equivalents, then left while under the Navy's authority. "I didn't like it anymore, " he recalls with only the slightest trace of disdain flickering over his stolid features, "so I bought a fish boat, a 34-foot Columbia River Bow Picker, and came up here. I started salmon fishing."

He arrived in Juneau in 1956. He had married six years earlier in Seattle, where he continued to do winter towboat work. He eventually was divorced. "The sea life makes marriage pretty tough," he says simply. "A sailor is kind of like a nomad. Whatever the job is — is where you go. During the war you'd be gone six or 12 months. It was the same in the Korean War. They'd say you'd be gone a few months, but they didn't really know how long it would be."

Smith has homes now in both Juneau and Seattle, where his family remains. The oldest of his three children is 30; he has seven grandchildren.

But "home" for all practical purposes is a passing ferryboat. As quarters go, it isn't a bad life. The *Malaspina,* which carries 750 passengers above and 134 vehicles in its warehouse-sized lower deck, has private dining rooms for the crew, and stewards to keep house. There are lounges, carpeted hallways, people to meet. Most of all, the passing scenery is so spectacular that hundreds of thousands of tourists happily pay money each year to sail along.

Taciturn by nature, Smith pretends not to notice. "It's hard to talk about the scenery because we're used to it," he explains. "We just don't pay much attention."

But he really notices a great deal. He watches closely for bald eagles whenever the boat passes close to shore, and he will always remember the day in 1964 when a pod of killer whales attacked a humpback whale while he was passing Hana's reef.

"They were killing him as we passed by," he recalls. "They'd get ahold of the whale's jaw. One would hang on. The rest would ram into his side. They got his mouth open, and the first thing they ate was his tongue. Then they laid big strips off his side."


Alaska summers, of course, are deceptively pleasant. Winters are the test of a sailing master's skill, and year-round, the pressures of the job are complex and far-reaching. Smith joined the fleet when it was formed in the early Sixties under Gov. William Egan. "There was a bunch of us fishing around here who'd shipped out of various ports all over the world, and we had licenses of one kind or another," he recalls. "We kind of just drifted into the ferry system."

That explanation glosses over a great deal. First Smith had to sign on as an "able-bodied" seaman, splicing cables and painting decks, in order to learn the channels. A pilot's license requires that the applicant first travel through each area, then draw all its twists and turns on a blank map.

"You have to draw all the parts," he explains. "The shallow spots, the rocks, the navigation aids, the cable areas, and so forth."

Cable areas? "You've got telephone cables here and there. You drop anchor in those places — it's awfully hard on 'em."

Smith spent six months as a sailor, then became the *Malaspina's* chief mate. "This was the first big boat," he explains. They had an old-timer named Merkley who was the first captain. He'd worked for Alaska Steam (Alaska Steamship Co.). He made the runs until we got trained, which didn't take so long in those days. The standards weren't as strict, and we

Continued on next page

Capt. Smith goes over charts of the waters around Douglas Island with Second Mate Robert E. Lee in the control room of the Columbia.

Continued from page 13

didn't have as many ports."

Alaska, in fact, has more coastline than the rest of the United States combined.

The routes have more than their share of trouble spots. Smith's least favorite portion of this run is Wrangell Narrows, a shallow-bottomed, tortuously narrow zigzag of water whose passable portions are never more than 300 feet wide. At night, the Narrows' blinking navigation lights are so numerous — and necessary — that the run is listed as a "late show" tourist attraction on the ferry's forward observation deck. "It looks like a pinball machine," Smith says.

The Narrows' worst times are foggy days when fishing boats travel the same water. "The Narrows in the fog kind of keeps you on your toes," allows Smith. "Most of the fish boats don't see you come up. You sound the signal, but the fisherman is sittin' on top of a screamin' Jimmy (a loud diesel engine) and he doesn't hear you."

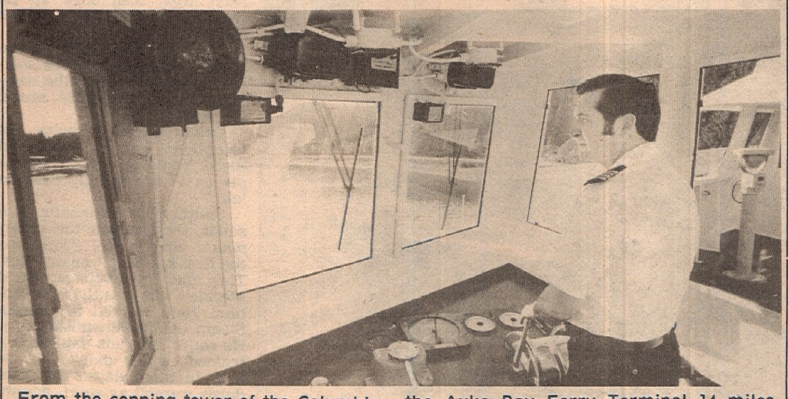
"So you keep watching to see if he's gonna maintain course," Smith explains, "which is probably a good thing if he's not in the middle of the channel. Or maybe he'll jump right in front of you. It's happened."

Not long ago one fisherman panicked and ran right in front of a ferry. "The boat was rolled over and sunk," Smith recalls, having heard the story from other pilots, "and the fisherman was killed. You just can't stop this ship like a car. If we're running slow, it takes about three lengths to stop it. At full speed it takes about a mile."

Smith had his own close call one foggy night in the Narrows a few years ago. "I've got this fish boat on the radar," he remembers, shifting a little uncomfortably. "I know he's there. I'm sounding the whistle, and he's dogging it. He's slowed down, and I'm slowed down. We're both just feeling our way through. I missed him by three or four feet. His stern was all the way under my sponson (overhang)."

Much of Smith's work, of course, is fairly routine, just as most of the ferry runs are safely uneventful. "Most of the time you're just hoping the controls work right," he says, "especially when you're going into the docks. And when you're going through a place, your mind is on the current, how it's handling the ship — and on the next course. You've always got to be looking ahead. You don't daydream. If you've got fish boats ahead, you worry about them, especially in a channel. It's

Continued on next page



From the conning tower of the Columbia, Capt. Smith patiently docks the ferry at the Auke Bay Ferry Terminal 14 miles north of Juneau.

Continued from page 14

awfully hard to stop when you've got a six-knot current at your stern. You just can't back her down. You'll broadside the channel, and the channel usually isn't wide enough."

Smith smiles. It has been a warm and sunny day, almost hot. "The joys of running are on a day like this," he says. "Most of the time it's foggy and such."

He stops briefly. "In the summertime, all the runs are nice. In the wintertime, they're all bad. You don't want to get caught in places like Wrangell's Narrows in a snowstorm. On the *Tustumena* — the Kodiak run — you can get the daylights kicked out of you real easy. I went out one day in a 45-knot wind toward the Barren Islands — and the next thing I knew the wind was 130. That's just plain bad weather. The ship does everything but stand on its end. It goes all *over* the place."

One winter, Smith was on the *Tustumena* when it took a tall wave frontally. He heard his hull crack with a thunderous boom. When he docked later, the crew found three massive cracks.

"If you get to icing," he adds, "that's bad. There's no way you can get that ice off. I carried one-hundred-and-fifty tons of it through one storm." He glances around him. "This ship could never take something like that. It's not built for that kind of weather. The *Tustumena* has a seagoing hull like a tanker. It goes straight down and has stabilizing fins to keep it from rolling."

The *Malaspina*, by contrast, has a narrower hull with an overhang.

Smith looks at his watch, and stirs. It is nearly time to bring the *Malaspina* into Ketchikan, a pleasant and fairly simple summertime task. "Not like the Kodiak run," Smith interjects. "You're trying to dock one of those things and you got so much ship out of the water that the wind is threatening to blow you up on the dock. Either that, or it's trying to blow you off the dock."

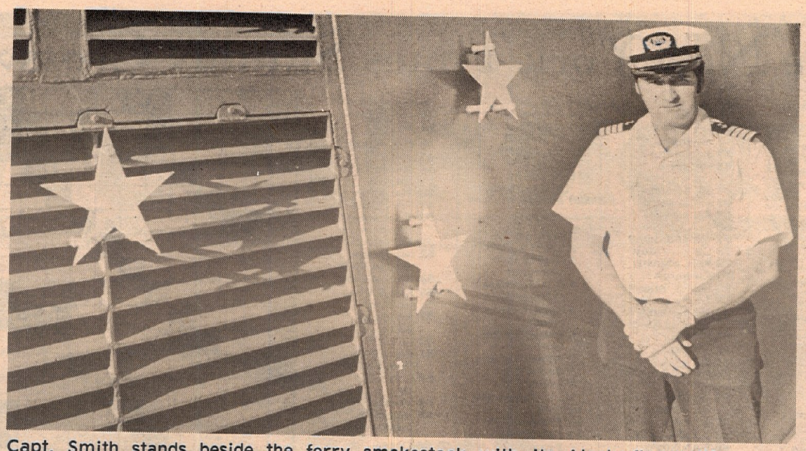
Does he get nervous, ever?

"I don't get excited," he says quietly. "I just hope like hell I can pull it off. You figure you've already got the skill, and the experience. You've just got to make use of it."

It was time to use a small amount of that skill and experience. Smith's quarters are a short walk down a dark hallway from the bridge, a sunlit spot filled with radarscopes, telephones, engine controls, charts and a quiet, bearded seaman who turns the big wooden wheel according to Smith's instructions.

"That's Sunny Point," Smith says, pointing to an old salmon cannery perched high on pilings. Ketchikan terminal is beyond.

"I'll go around the point at 30 to 40 degrees, then just do a lot of maneuvering and dock it."



Capt. Smith stands beside the ferry smokestack with its Alaska flag motif.

As Smith positions himself at the twin throttles, the scenery outside is kinetic. A cabin cruiser chugs by, several float planes buzz overhead, about to land. The inlet is deep blue and sparkling with dappled sunlight. A smaller ferry — none other than the *Chilkat*, now in local service — moves out from a dock beyond the terminal to cross the channel.

"Ten left rudder," Smith orders quietly. The seaman repeats the command as he turns the big wheel. Now Smith pulls the throttles, which hiss like an old railroad train. "Midships," and a few seconds later: "20 left rudder."

The huge ferry, moving vaguely sideways as if disabled, edges toward the high dock.

"Gimme the bow thruster quickly, please," shouts a crewman into the phone after Smith gives him a sudden nod. A "bow thruster" is a sideways engine thrust designed to counter wind and current direction. It helps stabilize the ship. In this case, a 15-knot wind was pushing the bow rather gently toward the dock while a southerly current was pushing the stern away. The extra thrust was needed to strike a balance.

As the ferry edged closer, Smith abruptly walked into the sunshine on the port wing to an identical set of wheelhouse controls. Now he could maneuver the ship while perched over the point where it would first touch the dock's huge shock-absorbing walls of piling cushioned by truck tire-sized rubber doughnuts.

A huge groaning sound followed as the pilings and rubber stretched to accommodate 3,000 tons of arriving ferryboat. Lines were pulled taut, and the drawbridge lowered as Smith looked down with calm satisfaction.

"That's all there is to it," he shrugged. He thrust his hands in his pockets and walked back into the wheelhouse.

# THE ALASKA LEGISLATURE

## In Memoriam

* RICHARD ALLIE DOWNING *

The members of the Fifteenth Alaska Legislature were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Richard Allie Downing, the first and former Alaska Commissioner of Public Works.

Richard was born March 13, 1916, in Cordova, and graduated from Cordova High School in 1934. He received a Bachelor's degree in mining engineering from the University of Alaska in 1940 and was a registered professional engineer in Alaska.

From 1959 to 1967, Richard served as Alaska's first Commissioner of Public Works, and was instrumental in the development of the Alaska Marine Highway System. He then worked extensively overseas in Africa, South America, and the Middle East on assignments which included the construction of the Trans-Java Highway in Indonesia.

Richard was listed in "Who's Who in the West," from 1955-1956 and again from 1969-1970. He was featured in "2,000 Men of Achievement," and found time to be a loyal member of the Shriners, and the Masons.

On behalf of the Legislature, we extend our deepest sympathies to Richard's family, his sons, Richard and Michael; his daughters, Meredith, Deborah, and Laurel Bill; his brother, Jack; and his sisters, Phyllis Carlson, Jean Anderson, Vera Becker, and Helen Aalund. He was a contributor to the betterment of Alaska and will be sorely missed by all.

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE

PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE

Date: March 21, 1988

Requested by: Senators Kerttula, Sturgulewski, Szymanski, Fahrenkamp, Halford, Coghill, Eliason, Rodey; Representatives Pearce and Hanley

# Ferry fleet grew up in decade of progress

## *From Chilkat to Columbia*

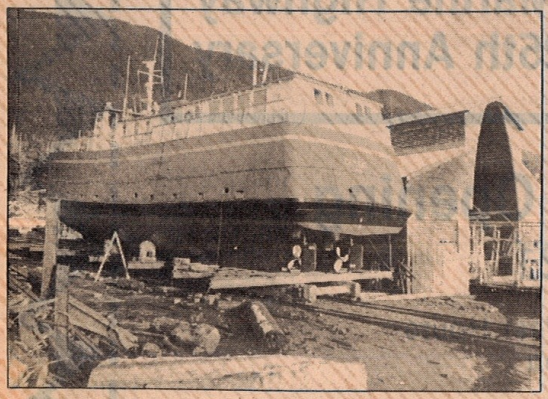
Mighty fleets from little **Chilkats** grow.

The 100-foot, blunt-bowed motor vessel Chilkat was ferrying Alaskans before the Alaska Marine Highway System even *was* a system. Alaska adopted the Chilkat with statehood in 1959 and kept the ship soloing on the Southeast run until a trio of larger ships floated the nickname Blue Canoe into the Last Frontier's familiar jargon.

Recall the days before oil money. Think of Alaska approving a $20 million bond issue for a ferry system: three ships at $4.5 million a copy and the shoreside docks, bridges and terminals to go with them. Many Alaskans remember that as a costly, crucial and indispensable decision to tie Alaskan communities together in Southcentral and Southeast.

The **Malaspina**, the **Matanuska** and the **Taku** heaved into Southeast from Seattle shipyards in 1963 as 352-foot-long triplet sister ships, each vessel driven by twinned 4,000-horsepower turbocharged Enterprise diesel engines. The ships moved at about 17 knots – considerably faster than the Southeast glaciers for which they were named.

The Malaspina was nine years old, the Matanuska 15, when a Portland, Ore., shipyard cut them in two and added 56 feet of overall length – and more vehicle space; and more staterooms.



**The Chilkat rode up the ways at Seaward Shipyard north of Ketchikan.**

The 296-foot **Tustumena**, built in Wisconsin, joined the fleet in 1964 with a home port in Seward. Cordova claimed the **Bartlett** in 1968 after the 193-foot vessel arrived from an Indiana shipyard.

Peterson Builders of Wisconsin sent the mid-sized **LeConte** to the blue and gold fleet's northern Southeast outposts in 1974. The 235-foot vessel, like all of its workmanlike Marine Highway System counterparts, carried vehicles – but the LeConte, Aurora, Chilkat and Bartlett were made for shorter runs and had no staterooms.

**The hull of the LeConte made a side-slip splash when floated at Peterson Builders in Sturgeon Bay, Wis., in late 1973.**

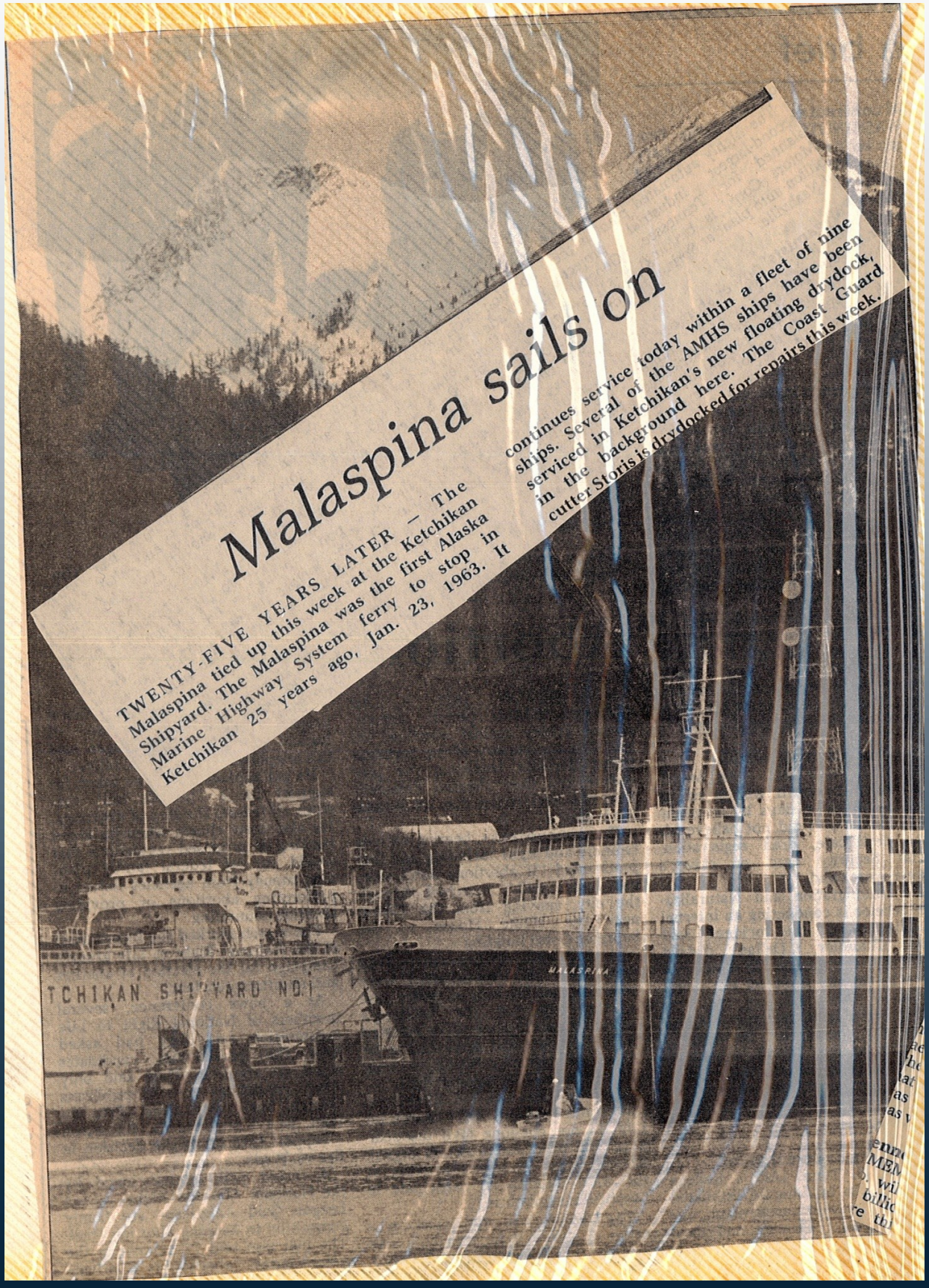
The former Swedish Viking Line cruise ship Stena Britannica provided years of sumptuous ferrying after 1968, dressed in first the white, then the blue paint of the renamed **Wickersham**, pole star of Alaska's fleet. But then Alaska sold that ship and settled down with the big, homey **Columbia.**

The LeConte cost $5.5 million in 1974. The 4,000-ton Columbia, on the other hand, came into service that year at a price of about $20 million. Its 418-foot length embraced 325 passenger berths and a deck with room for some 180 automobiles. The vessel boasted a service speed of 19 knots.

Ginger Ressler Collection

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

- 50th ANNIVERSARY -




Republished with permission of the Ketchikan Daily News

Ginger Ressler Collection

Page 4, Plaza Edition, May 4, 1988

# MV Wickersham was state's costly floating plum

**What assignment would you make for a man who had worked in food service for the U.S. Navy and had clocked in at New York City's elegant Waldorf-Astoria Hotel?**

What else but chief steward on the MV Wickersham, Alaska's nearest thing to a floating luxury hotel.

Howard Stevens remembers his stint on the lavish ferry as "my fondest duty" in nearly 20 years at sea with the Alaska Marine Highway System.

The Wickersham is recalled today as the high tide of sophistication for the state-owned fleet – and as, well, a kind of romantic aberration. Today's Alaskans, looking back on the former cruise ship's short-lived flagship status, are liable to laugh moderately when they reflect on how Alaska remade the Stena Britannica with paint and pride – and on how the vessel changed ferry transit in Southeast.

Stevens, now 76 and retired from AMHS since last fall, joined the Wickersham's crew about a year after the ship arrived red-painted from Sweden with "Viking Line" emblazoned on its sides. Gov. Walter Hickel's prize ferry was repainted white, then AMHS blue, but inside it retained [illegible]-ship refinements.

[illegible] swank dining room with sit-down service. Plush upholstery and hardwood moldings.

"The Wickersham was more fun to run," Stevens remembered.

He should know. He rode all of Alaska's ferries in 1969 as a consultant to the private concessionaire then providing stewards for the fleet. He took notes on crews and services.

Stevens, former owner of the Gilmore Hotel and Howard's Restaurant, later went aboard the Wickersham as a senior chief steward – and found a plum job.

"It was a better ship with better facilities," he said. "For the most part, they gave you the most qualified crew. And if there were any plums floating around, we probably got them."

But he knows the Wickersham was as costly to run as it was grand.

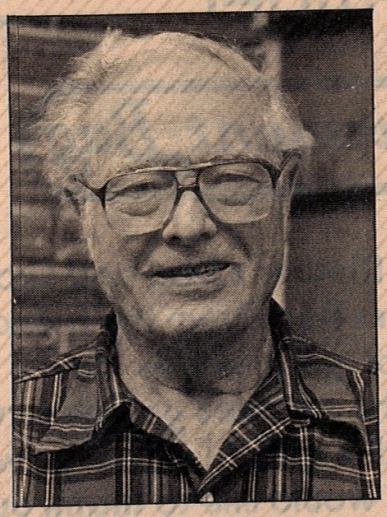
"I can recall as few as four southbound passengers on the Wickersham in the winter run to British Columbia," he said. "The crew was 67."

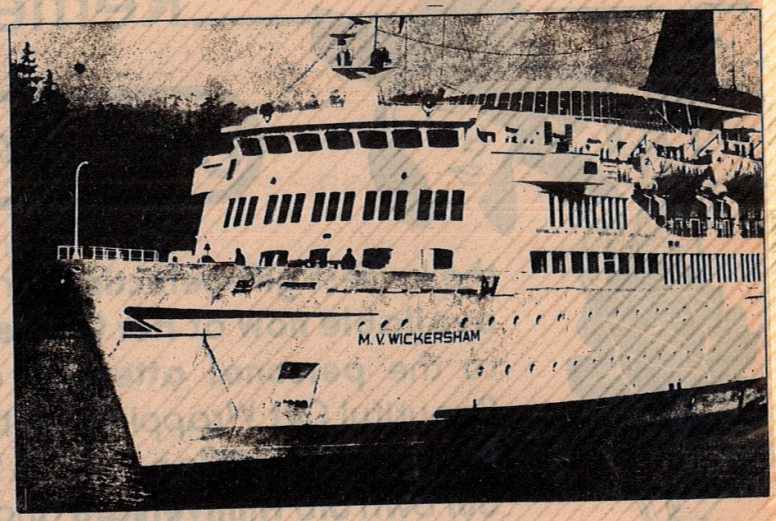
The foreign-bottom ship was prohibited by the federal Jones Act from carrying passengers between U.S. ports. Its southbound runs ended in B.C. When Hickel handed the ship's command to Gov. William Egan, the Wickersham went up for sale.

Its $7.5 million sale price was [illegible]mated to state appropriations for the $20 million cost of the Columbia.

Luxury was lost, but stories remained. One was recounted by Rick Kiffer, a former tourism leader in Southeast.

"Wickersham was beautiful, comfortable and thoroughly enjoyed by passengers – sauna and all," Kiffer said. "There was a funny story about Capt. Red Lockhart, who ran the marine portion of the system with an iron fist, getting caught in the sauna in the Wickersham and being unable to get out because he couldn't read Swedish instructions on how to unlock the door. He was eventually rescued."






**Howard Stevens ran the stewards department on Alaskans' luxury yacht.**

# The big question:

## What does future hold for ferries?

By JUNE ALLEN
*Daily News Staff Writer*

The new state of Alaska in 1959 owned one small ferry, the Chilkat, which plied the waters of Lynn Canal between Juneau and Haines. In 1963 she was joined by the three big ferries, the sister ships Malaspina, Matanuska and Taku. Since that time five other ships have joined the Alaska fleet, the Columbia, the LeConte, the Aurora, the Bartlett and the Tustumena, seven of which operate in Southeastern waters.

The ferry system has grown, but not changed significantly. Basically the same schedules as in 1963 are in use today. The number of sailings are cut back sharply in the winter off-season months. One ferry official said, "The ferry system is having an identity crisis."

The marine highway network celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, and at this time extensive studies and plans within the division are asking: what do the next 25 years hold in store?

This is a time of reduced state revenues, when several of the ships are beginning to show the ravages of time and need attention. The marine highway is not a moneymaker nor was it ever intended it would be, any more than a road between Anchorage and Fairbanks was meant to make money. In 1964, the earliest figures available, revenues of $2.35 million were offset by expenses of $4.05 million. The 1986 figures, the latest available, list $28.5 million in revenues and expenses of $49.6 million.

Marine highway planner Stan McAlister says one of the big changes for the future will be improved feeder systems of small, fast boats between outlying communities and marine highway hub communities, plus more frequent service. New styles of vessels are being considered for these shorter, town-to-city runs. He says more interest is already being shown in more fully utilizing the ferry system in the off-season. The trend, McAlister says, is toward more off-season sales and travel.

## Ships beginning to show ravages of time

Homer Sarber, former regional director of the Inland Boatmen's Union of the Pacific, Alaska region, says the present state administration has become more responsive to the needs of the marine highway system and personnel. Already an employee advisory committee has been formed and its recommendations taken under consideration. He said the recent increase of service during the holiday season, using both the LeConte and Aurora to meet the needs of the smaller Southeastern communities, is another indication of administration awareness of the areas' needs.

Former legislator Oral Freeman says he continues to believe the system would function better if it became a department of its own and not just an arm of another department. He also believes the state could create one position of a traveling liaison officer who would ride each of the ferries in turn and talk with crew members and passengers to see and hear first-hand what the system needs from the viewpoint of both operator and passenger. A person in this position would then report to someone in the division, Freeman says, who would actually *use* the information gathered.

Juneau Rep. Bill Hudson, himself a former marine highway director, has distributed his own suggestions to the press and public, urging modernization and changes in the structure of the ferry system.

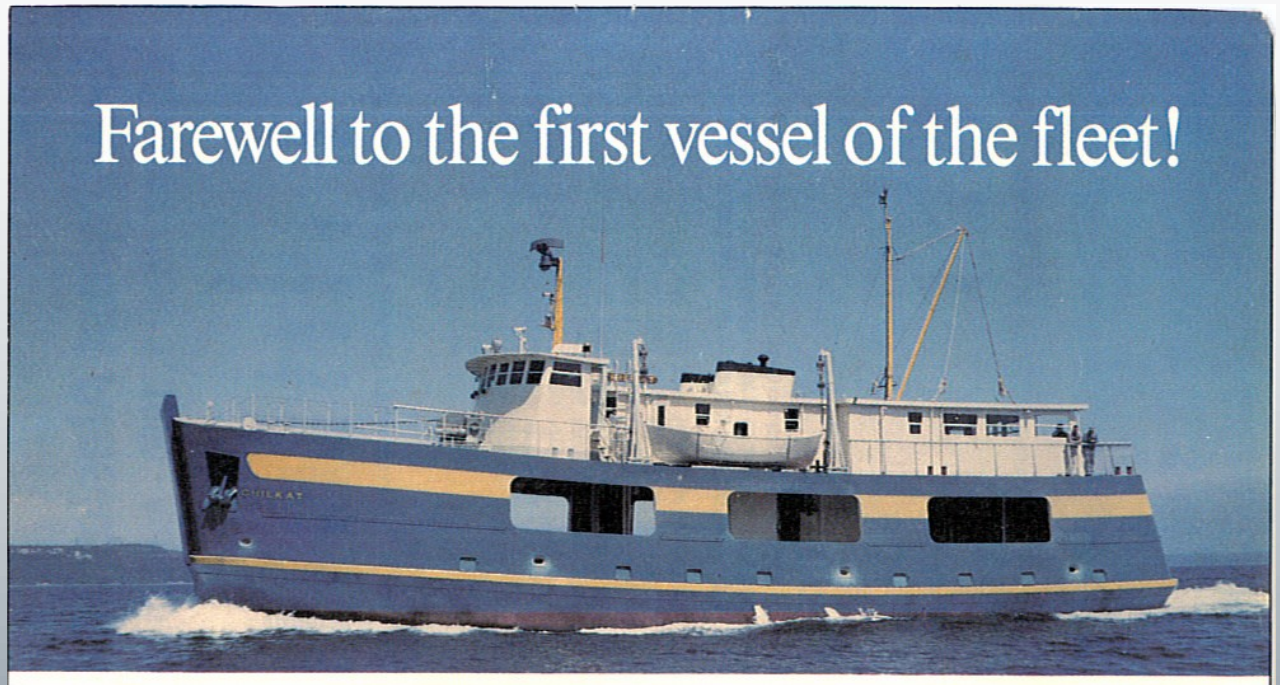
The marine highway division is presently working on a comprehensive plan for all-around improvements to be implemented in the next three to seven years as funding becomes available.

## A note from the governor

Gov. Steve Cowper issued a statement this week honoring the Alaska Marine Highway System's 25th year of service. It reads:

"The Alaska Marine Highway system is the essential water route connecting 31 communities along 3,500 miles of coastline. The blue and white vessels carry tourists and villagers, tractor trailers and baby strollers, milk and medicine. The Alaska ferries are the lifeline for many shoreside towns. They are a unique feature of Alaska and a graceful symbol of a certain way of life."

# Farewell to the first vessel of the fleet!



The snub-nosed M/V *CHILKAT*, designed and constructed for $100,000 was placed in service in the spring of 1957. Under contract between the Territory of Alaska and a private operator the M/V *CHILKAT* provided service between Tee Harbor and Haines. The 100 foot ship had a service speed of 10 knots and was capable of carrying 59 passengers and 15 vehicles of standard lengths. The M/V *CHILKAT* was given to the State of Alaska by the Territorial government following admission to the Union.

With the addition of three new 352-foot vessels to the Southeast fleet in 1963 and the M/V *CHILKAT's* renovation in the winter of 1964 the ship was transferred to Prince William Sound to provide year-round service to Cordova and Valdez. The M/V *CHILKAT* was later returned to Southeast Alaska and last sailed for the System in 1988 between Metlakatla and Ketchikan.

A fond farewell to our first "blue canoe!"

Captain Bill Hopkins Collection

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

- 50th ANNIVERSARY -


Captain Harold Payne, left, senior captain in the Alaska Marine Highway System, is presented a commendation award by Port Captain Kelly Mitchell making Payne honorary commodore of the fleet. The citation from Governor Cowper was in recognition of the veteran captain's 25 years of service to the state and "for his leadership, ship handling and seamanship abilities...for providing safe, essential service" that is "held in the highest esteem by the management, master, officers and crews."

## Ferry Festivities Set For Bellingham

Alaska Ferry Festival Week kicks off Oct. 3 in Bellingham, Wash., the new southern terminus of the Alaska Marine Highway System.

The M/V Columbia will arrive there that morning to become the focal point for the week-long festivities. The vessel will be open for tours, mini-cruises, and an opportunity to "stay aboard" one night.

The celebration is the port and community's way of welcoming Alaska ferry operations to Bellingham and of commemorating the first official sailing Oct. 6, when the M/V Matanuska arrives at 9:30am and departs at 8:00pm.

The Columbia will move the evening before to Whatcom International Shipping Terminal to make room for the Matanuska's arrival at Bellingham's new terminal that was built to accommodate Alaska ferries. Bellingham submitted the winning proposal to become the new southern terminus, offering better money and service provisions than Seattle and Tacoma. Seattle has been the system's southern terminus for 22 years.

Ribbon cutting and dedication ceremonies for Bellingham's new terminal building are set for 10:00am Oct. 3. Many other events are scheduled daily through the remainder of the week.

Ferry Festival Week is sponsored by the Port of Bellingham and a task force made up of representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, the Visitor and Convention Bureau, City of Bellingham and the news media.

Captain Bill Hopkins Collection

# Crews Come to the Rescue

The capable crews of two state ferries, the M/V Columbia and M/V Tustumena, successfully handled life-threatening emergencies recently.

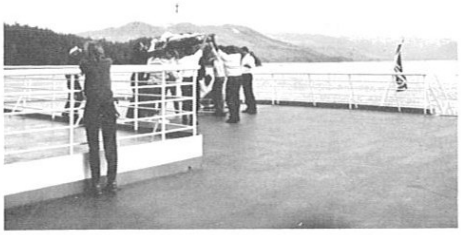
A passenger became unconscious as the Columbia was enroute from Sitka to Petersburg. Junior Purser Ted Shaw responded to the emergency, along with two Seattle firemen who were aboard for a familiarization and training cruise, and they were assisted by two private physician passengers. The U.S. Coast Guard was contacted, and soon a helicopter on a training flight in the area arrived to evacuate the passenger as soon as doctors determined it was safe to move her. The doctors administered CPR on the flight to Sitka, where city firemen transferred her to the hospital emergency room where her pulse was restored. She then was taken to Seattle for intensive care.

M/V Columbia crew members assist in the emergency evacuation of a stricken passenger.

"Such a speedy rescue from a ship at sea," reported Senior Purser Michael Dixon, "is a reflection of the dedication, skill and training of the crews of the Alaskan ferries. Through the years with the help of the U.S.C.G. and other organizations and people as listed above, the Alaska Marine Highway has compiled one of the best safety records for any type of transportation in Alaska, public or private."

The M/V Tustumena came to the rescue of a boat with five aboard that had lost power and was in danger of going aground in high winds on Rugged Island south of Seward.

"When it arrived on the scene," the *Kodiak Mirror* reported, the boat "was within a quarter of a mile of Rugged Island," noting that the island "has no beaches and is surrounded by rock outcroppings."



A Kodiak passenger on the Tustumena, the *Mirror* reported, "said Captain Bill Hopkins nosed the Tustumena right up to the (boat) and dropped a line to the vessel." The boat "was so close to a rock pile that the Tustumena could not maneuver and had to back away from the island with the stricken vessel in tow off the bow."

Once safely away from the island, the Tustumena held the boat "until the Coast Guard Cutter Mustang arrived from Seward to tow it into port."

Captain Bill Hopkins Collection

# Ferry part of rescue

By ANDY HALL
Staff Writer

The state ferry Tustumena came to the rescue of a boat that had lost power and was in danger of going aground in high winds Saturday evening.

The Tustumena was 20 miles south of Seward when it received a distress call from the M/V Cheetah. The 90-foot Cheetah, with five people on board, had lost power and was being blown toward the shore of Rugged Island in winds blowing 45 knots and gusting to 70.

Rugged Island has no beaches, only bluffs and is surrounded by rock outcroppings.

The Tustumena was the closest vessel and responded to the call. When it arrived on the scene the Cheetah was within a quarter of a mile of Rugged Island.

Jim Ashford of Kodiak was a passenger on the Tustumena during the rescue. He said Captain Bill Hopkins nosed the Tustumena right up to the Cheetah and dropped a line to the vessel.

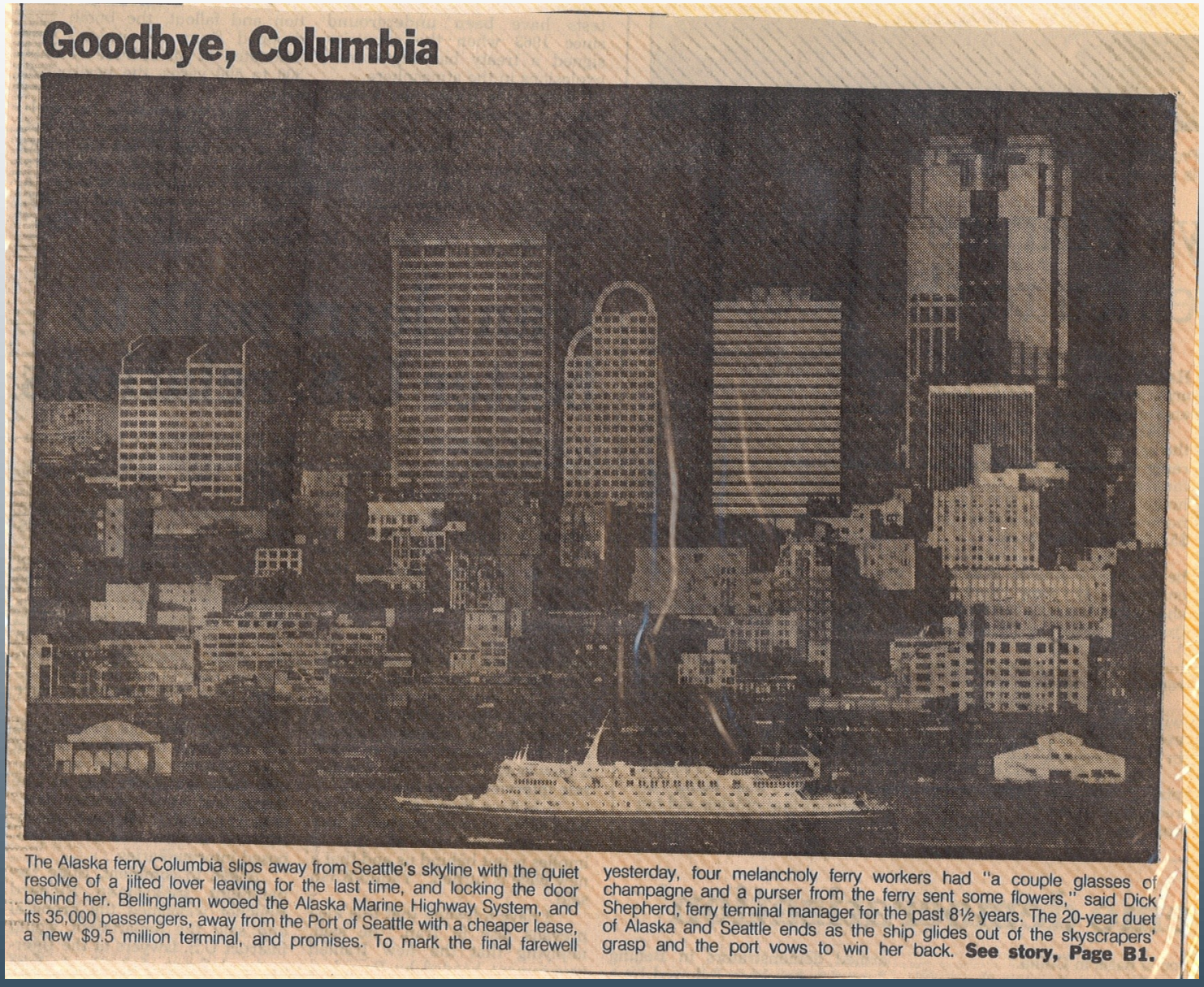
Ashford said the Cheetah was so close to a rock pile that the Tustumena could not maneuver and had to back away from the island with the stricken vessel in tow off the bow.

Once safely away from the island the Tustumena held the Cheetah until the Coast Guard Cutter Mustang arrived from Seward to tow it into port.

# ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

- 50th ANNIVERSARY -

## Goodbye, Columbia



The Alaska ferry Columbia slips away from Seattle's skyline with the quiet resolve of a jilted lover leaving for the last time, and locking the door behind her. Bellingham wooed the Alaska Marine Highway System, and its 35,000 passengers, away from the Port of Seattle with a cheaper lease, a new $9.5 million terminal, and promises. To mark the final farewell yesterday, four melancholy ferry workers had "a couple glasses of champagne and a purser from the ferry sent some flowers," said Dick Shepherd, ferry terminal manager for the past 8½ years. The 20-year duet of Alaska and Seattle ends as the ship glides out of the skyscrapers' grasp and the port vows to win her back. **See story, Page B1.**

Ginger Ressler Collection

# Crowd greets first Alaska ferry to Bellingham

**Special to the Mirror**

Thousands of Bellingham and Whatcom County residents flocked to the Fairhaven waterfront and the Bellingham Cruise Terminal Tuesday, Oct. 3, to welcome the M/V Columbia, the first Alaska ferry to arrive at the new southern terminus.

The event marked the beginning of Alaska Ferry Festival Week, the week-long celebration of the opening of the new $9.3 million, six-acre terminal that is the new southern terminus for the Alaska Marine Highway System. Crowds lined the shores of south Bellingham, spilling from the terminal, out over the dock and along the passenger transfer span to watch the flagship of the Alaska Marine Highway fleet snug up to the dock, cinch its mooring lines tight, and receive the vehicle ramp.

Alaskan vehicles unloading at Bellingham, Wash. to a warm welcome.

Cheers and applause broke out as the first vehicles disembarked and were guided through the crowd by police.

By Thursday evening, following a day of mini-cruises from Bellingham Bay and dockside tours, 8,265 visitors had boarded from Columbia to see first-hand the type of vessel that will be making weekly calls on Bellingham, linking Southeast Alaska with the Lower 48.

M/V Columbia Captain Dale Julian said, "We're very pleased with the warm reception we've received from the community and impressed by how hard everybody has worked to make this operation work as smoothly as it has."

Following the arrival of the M/V Matanuska Friday morning, Captain Art Johnson said, "We really enjoyed the reception we got on our first official trip into Bellingham. It's a wonderful facility."

Hundreds of visitors informally toured the M/V Matanuska Friday before the return trip to Alaska.

Speaking at the inaugural sailing ceremony were Alaska Lieutenant Governor Stephen McAlpine, State Legislators Bette Cato and Lloyd Jones, Transportation Commissioner Mark Hickey and a host of other Washington officials.

During the three days of tours and open house, visitors were entertained by musicians and dancers including the Cape Fox Dancers from Saxman and the New Archangel Dancers from Sitka.



Republished with permission of the Kodiak Daily Mirror

Captain Bill Hopkins Collection

# Ferries Get Huge Bellingham Welcome


Crowds of Bellingham and Whatcom County residents flocked to the Fairhaven waterfront and the Bellingham Cruise Terminal October 3 to welcome the M/V Columbia, the first Alaska ferry to arrive at the new southern terminus.

The M/V Matanuska received a similar greeting there three days later.

The events marked Alaska Ferry Festival Week, the week long celebration of the opening of the new $9.3 million, six-acre terminal that is the new southern terminus for the Alaska Marine Highway System. Crowds lined the shores of south Bellingham, spilling from the terminal, out over the dock and along the passenger transfer span to watch the flagship of the Alaska Marine Highway fleet snug up to the dock, cinch its mooring lines tight, and receive the vehicle ramp.

Cheers and applause broke out as the first vehicles disembarked and were guided through the crowd by police.

By Thursday evening, following a day of mini-cruises from Bellingham Bay and dockside tours 8,265 visitors had boarded the Columbia to see first-hand the type of vessel that will be making weekly calls on Bellingham, linking Southeast Alaska with the Lower 48.

M/V Columbia Captain Dale Julian said, "We're very pleased with the warm reception we've received from the community and impressed by how hard everybody has worked to make this operation work as smoothly as it has."

Following the arrival of the M/V Matanuska Friday morning, Captain Art Johnson said, "We really enjoyed the reception we got on our first official trip into Bellingham. It's a wonderful facility."

Hundreds of visitors informally toured the M/V Matanuska Friday before the return trip to Alaska.

Speaking at the inaugural sailing ceremony were Alaska Lieutenant Governor Stephen McAlpine, State Legislators Bette Cato and Lloyd Jones, Transportation Commissioner Mark Hickey and a host of Washington officials.

During the three days of tours and open house, visitors were entertained by musicians and dancers including Saxman's Cape Fox Dancers and Sitka's New Archangel Dancers.

**"The closer the Columbia steamed to the dock the more vessels appeared in its wake along shore, with horns tooting, fireworks shooting and plumes of water sprayed by fireboats creating iridescent curtains."**
*(From the Bellingham Herald)*

Captain Bill Hopkins Collection